Notes for the NuTV, Communications Screening February 15, 1996

A few notes on a recent cycle of work exploring the possibilities of "subverting the narrative": I wanted to construct a narrative which would touch on, reach out to, expose the larger stories which contain our lives, our stories, public attitudes and official histories--what Frederick Jameson (sp?) refers to as the "master" narrative from which all other stories are generated. Like a xerox, or like a dubbing process in video. I see the metanarrative somewhat differently: as a haunting, a story which seeps or leaks into other stories--I prefer Salman Rushdie's chutney metaphor of history, of story.

I began "The Dreams of the Night Cleaners," a one hour docu-fiction as a poetic prose work in 1989 and completed it in the Spring of '95. It's been published now in two anthologies. I worked with the subject matter visually and conceptually through three different video installations: one, autobiographical on family history bringing my Indian grandmothers together with my grandmother of Scottish-Irish heritage in a multi-channel installation working with a video quilt, "My Two Grandmothers."

Another, portraits of people working as night shift cleaners, "Working Portraits," a multi-channel installation placing monitors for the twenty portraits in front of three bill-board sized film transparencies. Two of the people in the portraits work played roles in the drama you'll see today.

And the third installation is a look into the archives, "Archival Moments." In the archives, my search was initially for Mackenzie King's policy referred to as "the direct passage ruling". What I found in the archives, in the 1906 through 1908 time period, Mackenzie King was in charge of several Royal Commissions responding to the race riots in Vancouver and the intense anti-Asian sentiments in B.C. It was a time of economic downturn--in the reports, "clean/unclean" kept appearing along with the refrain, "these people are taking our jobs" which echoes with the attitudes being expressed in the political and public spheres in the 1990's.

The story, "The Dreams of the Night Cleaners," is a story of secret telling and haunting. Unlike Joseph Conrad's story, "The Secret Sharer"--two men on a ship--this is two women in an airline office--one a crew scheduler, the other, a night cleaner. I worked from the news stories prominent, still prominent today: the job loss facing crew schedulers with the merging of Canadian and American airlines, and the job loss facing cleaners as a result of contract work. The stresses which surface when people face job loss generates the story. The story is both researched and autobiographical: I wanted to tell my father's story--coming to Canada from India in the early fifties. Mackenzie King's policy had restricted, almost eliminated Indian immigration until 1948, with the United Nations declaration of Human Rights. With his dreams dashed--violence erupted. The fragments seen of a woman lying in blood, what appears to be a murder--are the character Usha's and my

memories of her mother Jeanne.

The narrative is structured as fragments: a television news talk show, a fairy tale, a mother/daughter argument, a workplace incident. A storyteller, also a night cleaner but of airplanes, intervenes, comments on the story.

Formally, the borders and art direction are inspired by Indian miniatures--in the edit suite, I realized the "tiling" effect of Indian miniatures could be accomplished in video.

History is haunting these characters. You'll see the Komagata Maru float through Jeanne, the archivist's living room. It was a test case in 1914 of Mackenzie King's Direct Passage Rule (that is, non-stop passage, still impossible today with jets, not steamship travel).

The metanarrative I refer to touches on attitudes of racial purity, still alive in the concepts being expressed by the politicians today, at the end of the twentieth century, echoing the attitudes seen in the footage from the archives, 1906 through 1914, of the Vancouver Province newspaper.

The metanarrative I refer to also makes reference to international monetary policies, the economic story which affects us. The story Devika tries to tell the interviewer is based on real incidents with the World Bank. There are certain stories which remain secret, stories which don't fit the "official" story.

The story "Dreams" moves into fantasy in its conclusion--a fairy tale to comfort wounded adults, laughter to explode the despair coming from the effects of public policy on our individual lives. "The Dreams of the Night Cleaners" makes reference to the larger public stories that threaten to engulf us and the smaller stories that are our individual lives.